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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA, AF/SPG, AF/E, PRM FOR LANGE

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SUBJECT: UNHCR UPDATES ON REFUGEE SITUATION IN CAIRO

REF: A. 08 CAIRO 1332

[1](#)B. 08 CAIRO 1231

[1](#)C. 08 CAIRO 1258

[1](#)D. 08 CAIRO 2583

[1](#)E. CAIRO 36

[1](#)F. 08 CAIRO 1762

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: We attended the Cairo Office of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees' (UNHCR) multilateral meeting on February 4 to discuss refugee developments and UNHCR's plans for 2009. UNHCR partners, NGO's, and western embassies also participated. Following the meeting, UNHCR Regional Representative Saad Al Attar told us that UNHCR's relationship with the Government of Egypt (GOE) has worsened in the past year. UNHCR no longer has unfettered access to potential refugees and asylum seekers, and is prohibited from working with Palestinians. UNHCR summarized its operations for 2008, and addressed the major factors that impinge on its ability to assist refugees including budgetary constraints, a sharp increase in irregular transitory movement, and GOE pressure to limit refugee programs. Cairo is home to one of the largest urban refugee populations in the world. Estimates of the unofficial refugee population vary between 1-2 million. The large refugee population presents UNHCR with logistical challenges to providing assistance, and budgetary constraints limit UNHCR to providing a minimum of services. Refugees are dissatisfied with the quantity and quality of service. There is no program to provide medical procedures and refugees either go without needed services or negotiate cheap operations that only complicate their medical conditions. End Summary.

UNHCR-GOE Relations: From Bad to Worse

[1](#)2. (SBU) Al Attar told the group that since February 2008 there has been a significant change in UNHCR's relationship with the GOE. UNHCR no longer has "automatic" access to potential refugees and asylum seekers. Al Attar stated that UNHCR sent 82 letters to the GOE on this situation without receiving a single response. The only group to which UNHCR was granted access was a group of 149 Eritreans and Ethiopians held in Aswan (reftel A). He said 118 Eritreans were determined to be refugees and were accepted by Canada. However, these refugees were still being held in Aswan as there was no agreement on the part of the GOE to release them.

[1](#)3. (C) Al Attar told us privately that the High Commissioner's (HC) call to open the Gaza border crossings during the Gaza conflict had infuriated the GOE. As a result, the GOE will not allow UNHCR to attend any meetings on aid to Palestinians. The GOE told Al Attar on February 3

that "UNHCR is with the Doha group" (Note: This is reference to the GOE's view of the current political division in the Middle East with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan on one side and Qatar (Doha), Syria, and Iran on the other side.) and it is prohibited from working with Palestinians in Egypt, or on Gaza. He stated that despite UNHCR's two memoranda of understanding with the Egyptian Red Crescent, and its provision of USD 80,000 in basic emergency needs assistance, blankets and medicine for Gaza, the GOE even prohibited UNHCR from working with a Palestinian/Iraqi family that was to be resettled in Europe. The case was turned over to International Organization for Migration. Al Attar assessed that as a result of the HC's comment, the GOE no longer appears to be committed to adhering to the refugee conventions. He no longer has the ability to raise refugee issues with the GOE, and for the first time in his 27-year career, he feels "suffocated." Al Attar told us that he is contemplating putting in for a transfer.

Increase in Irregular Migration

14. (SBU) Al-Attar told the group that the most significant change in refugee patterns over the past year was the irregular movement of Eritreans and Ethiopians to the Israeli border. The GOE arrested and imprisoned approximately 2,000 trying to cross the border. Egypt forcibly deported many of these migrants back to Eritrea (reftels B-E). (note: According to human rights groups, Egypt forcibly repatriated approximately 1,200 Eritrean in June 2008. Amnesty International reported that between December 23, 2008 and January 18, 2009 Egypt forcibly repatriated about 100 Eritreans. End Note). Al Attar thanked Ambassador Scobey for her help with Eritreans detained by Egypt and scheduled for deportation (reftels D, E).

15. (C) Privately, Al Attar stated that in the past two months, Egypt has not shot any African migrants at the border. According to Amnesty International however at least 28 African migrants, in 2008, were shot by Egyptian police while attempting to smuggle across the border. Al Attar said he was not aware of any Egyptian policy change on border procedures. He told us that Israeli troops recently shot and killed two African migrants after they successfully crossed the border (NFI). Al Attar said the Israeli Head of Immigration told him that approximately 6,000 Africans crossed in Israeli in the past year. Despite a change in Israeli Employment Law, preventing African migrants from obtaining work (NFI), UNHCR expects the irregular migration to continue because of the terrible human rights situation in the Horn of Africa, especially in Eritrea. According to Al Attar, Human smuggling in the Sinai thrives because it pays more than drugs. Although Israel is the most popular destination, other routes through Egypt and Libya to Europe and to Europe through Jordan, Syria, and Turkey are growing in popularity. Al Attar told us that refugees say "it is better to be a beggar in Europe, than a teacher in Asmara or Addis Ababa."

16. (C) Al Attar said that Egypt's solution to this phenomenon of irregular migration is to deport the migrants back to their countries of origin. He told us that those caught by Egyptian police transiting the border who possess UNHCR identification will be imprisoned for one-year and released back to UNHCR. However, if the migrants possess no refugee documentation the GOE will imprison them and then repatriate them to their home countries. Al Attar is concerned because many Eritreans are going by boat straight from Eritrea to the Sinai Peninsula without bothering to register as refugees. He added that the GOE is especially keen to make sure that those avoiding military service be sent back and not given asylum. Al Attar claimed that there is "an agreement in principle between Egypt and Sudan" to return Eritrean and Ethiopian refugees, registered in Sudan, to Sudan vice their countries of origin. He said that UNHCR's Assistant High Commissioner Erika Feller will come to Cairo to follow up on this agreement and will seek a meeting with the U.S. Embassy.

Refugee Services Impacted by Fixed Budget, Higher Prices

17. (U) Al Attar asked what effect the financial crisis would have on future USG funding for UNHCR. He told us that UNHCR Cairo's budget has remained unchanged since 2002, while the registered refugee population has grown by four times to 43,000. In 2008, UNHCR Cairo's budget was USD 5.5 million and Al Attar hopes to increase this to USD 6 million for 2009. However, Al Attar added that this budgetary increase will not account for the 30% increase in the prices of basic necessities in Cairo over the last year, which further reduces the ability of UNHCR and its partner organization to provide for refugee needs. In 2008, UNHCR provided USD 48 per year/per capita for financial and basic medical assistance. This is down from USD 648 in 2000, and Al Attar acknowledges that this amount "does not begin to cover the basic expenses that refugees incur."

18. (U) Despite the challenges, UNHCR and Caritas in 2008 provided pharmaceutical support for 700 chronically ill patients, and supplied medical care for 350 pregnant women, and incubation for 30 infants. UNHCR and Catholic Relief Services provided 6,500 education grants ranging from LE 850-1550 (USD 155-280), which helped defray some costs for enrollment in private, public and refugee schools. UNHCR also funded programs to care for 180 unaccompanied minors and reduce youth violence among Sudanese refugees. Due to the lack of basic funds, UNHCR and its partners also provide self-reliance and vocational training for the refugees. In 2008, partner organizations provided vocational training for 900 refugees, and placed 73 trainees in local jobs.

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GOE Discouraging Refugee Self-Reliance Training

19. (C) Al Attar stated that the GOE on February 3 expressed concern that UNHCR's self-reliance/vocational training programs enable refugees to take "Egyptian jobs." The GOE told UNHCR that it should not offer refugees vocational training programs unless the refugees have agreed to participate in the voluntary repatriation programs. UNHCR is working with International Labor Organization to conduct a survey on its self-reliance training activities. The survey results will be released in April. UNHCR and its partners will use the survey to provide targeted training opportunities for refugees, but Al Attar noted that the training will be linked to voluntary return.

Some Progress on Voluntary Repatriation

110. (SBU) Al Attar said that the "positive development" for 2008 was the success of UNHCR's voluntary repatriation programs. He said that 1,800 Iraqis voluntarily returned in 2008 (reftel F). This constitutes 18 percent of the registered Iraqi refugees in Egypt. (Note: The numbers of Iraqi refugees registered with UNHCR only declined by 500, which probably means that many Iraqis, already living in Cairo, registered with UNHCR to obtain assistance. End Note). Al Attar stated that the repatriation of Iraqis has slowed, but he expects it to pick up after the end of the current school year. He also told us that the UNHCR Cairo office repatriated 900 South Sudanese last year, down from 1,250 in 2007. Al Attar blames the reduction on the situation in South Sudan, where he says there is "no development and no jobs." He expects that the number repatriated to Sudan will decrease again this year.

Resettlement is not the Solution

111. (SBU) Al Attar assessed that resettlement is not the

solution to the refugee situation in Cairo. He is concerned that an emphasis on resettlement will create a "pull factor" encouraging more refugees to come to Egypt. Last year, UNHCR resettled 925 refugees from Egypt to third countries, of which 425 were from Sub-Saharan Africa and the remainder mostly Iraqis. Currently, UNHCR only processes resettlement for those considered "at risk." This includes refugees that have been tortured, suffer from life-threatening medical conditions, or those "in need of protection." UNHCR plans to resettle 900 refugees out of Egypt in 2009.

¶12. (C) Comment: Egyptian concerns about repatriation or resettlement options, economic competition between refugees and Egyptians for limited job opportunities, and discussions over UNHCR's access to potential asylum seekers in Egyptian prisons creates tension between the GOE and UNHCR. High Commissioner Guterres' call on January 5 to open Gaza border crossing exacerbated an already tense relationship. However, the GOE does not believe the relationship is as bad as what UNHCR believes (details coming septel). UNHCR feels pressure from the GOE and regularly approaches us about our inability to take emergency resettlement cases, the length of our resettlement process, and the absence of a DHS official with whom to coordinate on resettlement. Both Saad Al Attar and Deputy Director Katharina Lumpp are exhausted by the bureaucracy, and new faces and a new approach may help to reinvigorate UNHCR and its relationship with the GOE.
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